ARTICLE APPEARED ON PAGE 11A

CHICAGO TRIBUNE
17 February 1987

An addiction to covert operations despite their limited value

William Pfaff

PARIS—As the direction of the CIA passes from William Casey, enthusiastic patron of the "operations" side of the intelligence agency, to Robert M. Gates, a career intelligence analyst, a good deal is being written approvingly about Casey's rebuilding of the agency's covert action capability. No one seems to be asking what covert action is worth, or whether it recently has done the United States any good.

"Covert," of course, has in CIA matters acquired a rather peculiar definition, that of an officially proclaimed program, debated in Congress, and followed in close detail by the press. The government itself is responsible for this, since officials deliberately make known their "covert" programs to promote their policy in Congress and collect support from the public.

Possibly the United States runs truly covert "covert" programs, in addition to the ones we know so much about. One is inclined to doubt it, though—Americans never having been particularly talented in this matter, as well as being devoted to publicizing what we are up to. Support for anticommunist, or ostensibly anticommunist, guerrilla movements in Afghanistan, Angola, Cambodia and Nicaragua certainly is the main element in current U.S. covert operations.

Serious questions should be asked. First is a political question: Have these movements a serious chance of succeeding? The answer in every case except the Afghan is no. The contras will return to Managua only if the United States Army takes them there. The guerrillas the U.S. supports in Angola and Cambodia are tribal, regional or factional, not national. The Afghan resistance is a national movement of resistance to a foreign occupation and has imposed severe costs upon the Soviet Union, with the result that Moscow now wants out of Afghanistan. But like the United States in Vietnam 20 years ago, the Soviet Union wants it both ways—to leave Afghanistan and also to keep a communist government there.

Second is a moral question. If a guerrilla movement isn't going to win, is support for it justified? The guerrillas themselves may say they will fight on, no matter what their prospects are. They are to be honored if they take that stand. For the United States to give support to guerrillas without serious prospect of success implies a cynical decision to let them die for American interests, while Washington reserves the right to abandon them when that seems expedient.

Let us not forget that the United States has again and again supported guerrilla movements and then dropped them, often after having encouraged them to commit themselves to combat and risks of a scale they might not otherwise have dared. The list of victims is a sobering one, including Ukrainians, Albanians, Chinese Nationalists, Tibetans, Kurds, Meos and Montagnard tribesmen in Vietnam. There is not much doubt that the contras sooner or later will join that list.

Adm. Bobby Inman, who directed the National Security Agency for four years and then became deputy director of the CIA, recently told a University of California at Berkeley seminar that he is skeptical of the usefulness of covert action. "I'm not persuaded that efforts to change governments have over the long haul been either very successful or very effective. It's hard to get along with unfriendly governments; it's even harder to try and prop up people to govern that you helped put in place that don't have the capacity to govern." He added that he is persuaded that, in the CIA, "covert action has tended to draw support away from what I consider a much more vital function: understanding what goes on in the outside world."

Two factors are responsible for the American government's addiction to covert enterprises despite their demonstrated limits. The first is that covert action provides *something* to do. It does little to answer the real problem, but it answers the problem of seeming to do something about the real problem. It provides a useful illusion.

The second reason we like covert action is that it is exciting and seems romantic. "The trade of the spy is a very fine one," wrote Honore de Balzac. "Is it not in fact enjoying the excitements of a thief, while still retaining the character of an honest citizen? . . . The only excitement which can compare with it is that of the life of a gambler."

Like the gambler, the covert operator, of course, loses more often than he wins. For him, as an individual, the game may nonetheless justify the odds. For a government, dealing in national interests both grave and enduring, the gambler's choices are surely false choices.